

The Black Death

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Summary: The Ellimist forces the Animorphs into an unholy alliance...

1. Default Chapter Title

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Animorphs: The Black Death

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1: The Infestation

A Predator ship in Zero-Space

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Malarnex, Predator warrior and leader of the Fenris Tribe, sat in his command chair on the bridge of his ship. He was in a good mood. Since he had taken the mantle of Leader, the tribe had gone from strength to strength. Soon, the Fenris Tribe would be the most feared in all Predator society. As far as he knew there was only one Hunt that had gone sour: the Hunt on the world known as Earth a few months ago. Malarnex was at a loss to explain that one. The Predator who had gone, Varkan, had been one of his best warriors and yet he had been beaten. What was even more galling was that the prey who had bested

him were mostly human children! They had Andalite morphing capability and one Andalite ally but logic dictated that one able Predator like Varkan should have killed them all. Malarnex had had to alter most of the details in his report to the Elders. His tribe would have been a laughing stock if they had found out the whole truth! Still, that was of no concern right now. His business was the upcoming hunt and the students that were to participate.

Leader!

Malarnex turned and saw Vorka, his best and most trusted warrior, standing in the doorway. Like Andalites, the Predators were capable of thought speech but not many outsiders were aware of this as they rarely talked to 'prey species'.

What is it, Vorka?

The students are almost ready and we'll be dropping out of Zero-Space soon. Should I prepare the prey shuttle?

Yes, you should, Malarnex was looking forward to this hunt. Load at least twenty into the shuttle and launch it. The prey should have matured by the time we arrive. I want our students to face their hardest challenge yet. Meet me at the training area when it's done.

Once Vorka had left Malarnex went down to the training area where thirty other Predators were sparring and preparing themselves. They were all capable and well trained but were young and untried. Malarnex touched his forehead and the thunderbolt insignia that was burned onto it.

By the end of the hunt his students would either be marked, like he was, or they would be dead.

Leader! There is a problem! Vorka seemed worried, which was most unusual.

What is it?

The prey shuttle is out of control. It is not responding to the recall signal and it has deviated from its course.

WHAT!

They hurried to the bridge.

Where is that shuttle headed now? Malarnex was seething with anger and worry. This prey was the most resilient and the most deadly he had ever known. The Predators only hunted them on certain planets where there was no sentient life and no chance of complication. If, however, the prey were allowed free rein on a heavily populated world the consequences would be disastrous.

According to these readings it will land on the third planet of the Sol system. The Earth planet, one of the bridge crew reported.

_Earth again. Is that system cursed? _Malarnex's good mood was rapidly disappearing.

Can we destroy the shuttle before it lands? he asked. The crew all shook their heads. Then ready one pod for departure.

One pod only, Leader? Vorka asked in surprise.

The students are not going now, Vorka, Malarnex said. Only you and I will be going. The situation is out of our control and we will have to deal with it ourselves. If we act quickly enough, we should be able to destroy the prey before their numbers become too great.

Why should we bother? Vorka angrily asked.

I know your feelings about that world but we have no choice. I don't really want to have to explain to the Elders why one of our main hunting grounds may be ruined due to our actions, do you? Malarnex retorted.

Vorka growled angrily and turned away. I'll do it, Leader. But only for the Tribe's honour!

Malarnex waited until Vorka had left and then turned to the crew again. Where will that shuttle land precisely?

If my readings are accurate it will land in the same area of the last hunt on that world.

Malarnex grimaced. This was getting worse all the time. Send a request to the home world for reinforcements and stay in orbit once we arrive. I will need as much support as possible.

There are reports of Yeerk ships in that area.

Then blast them into oblivion! Malarnex roared. What are they to such as we? If they need reminding of that, do so.

With pleasure, Leader. The crew remembered the fight with the Yeerks well. It had been a glorious battle.

Malarnex left to prepare himself. He had a hard battle ahead now but that was better than trying to explain this to the Elders. He just hoped that he would be in time. If not, his tribe would be disgraced and everyone on Earth would be facing a hideous deathâ€¦

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Earth

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The Animorphs were flying home from their latest mission against the Yeerks. They had just freed another dozen Hork-Bajir and sent them to the Ellimist's valley.

Is it just me or is Visser 3 really starting to lose his touch? Marco asked.

For once, Marco's right, Rachel said. That was too easy.

Don't get too overconfident, Jake said. We got lucky that time but it won't be that easy again.

Yeah whatever, Great Leader, Marco quipped. Can't you loosen up once in a while?

Hey, what's that? Tobias had suddenly noticed a ball of fire in the sky. As they watched, it plunged into the mountains and disappeared from sight.

A meteorite? Cassie asked.

Let's check it out, Jake replied. Ax, how much time do we have?

One hour exactly, Prince Jake. But I must tell you I do not like this. I sensed something strange about that object.

We'll never know unless we go and look, will we? Ryan put in. Besides, I feel like kicking some more Yeerk butt!

Marco sighed. Oh great. We already had Xena and now we've got Hercules too!

It wasn't an overstatement. Since joining them Ryan had become almost as 'insane' as Rachel. Unlike David, however, he didn't have a sadistic streak and he was a team player.

Is there any chance we could stay serious? Jake broke in, sounding exasperated. Are we going to do this or aren't we? In reply, they abruptly started flying toward the meteorite's landing area. I'll take that as a yes, Jake muttered and turned to follow them.

They would not have been so eager if they knew that the meteorite was actually the lost prey shuttle. As soon as it had smashed into the ground its automated systems kicked in and it launched what looked like a tractor onto the surface. Then the back of the tractor opened as it ran and it started to drop large oval shaped objects onto the ground. It dropped around twenty in all. Once that was done, the tractor and what was left of the shuttle exploded. The whole process had taken less than two minutes.

The Animorphs arrived just as the shuttle and tractor had exploded.

I do not like the looks of this, Ax warned.

Me neither, Ax, Jake replied grimly. It didn't look like a meteorite to me.

Should I go and have a closer look? Cassie said.

Oh shit! Tobias broke in. He had been scanning the area around the crash site. We've got trouble coming!

What is it, Tobias? Rachel asked.

A load of hunters is coming this way. They're the jerks who shot another hawk out of the sky around here last week!

They've got to be jerks, Marco spat. It looks like Johnny's with them.

Who's he? Tobias asked.

Just about the worst jerk in all of school now. Marco replied.

We'll come back here later when they've gone then," Jake decided. I hope they aren't controllers.

Controllers? No chance. A Yeerk would be wasted on that moron, Rachel sneered.

Are we doing the right thing? Cassie asked. Leaving whatever's down there, I mean?

We can't take the risk, Jake said. Only one has to be a controller to blow everything.

I suppose so, Cassie sighed. She couldn't shake the feeling that they were making a hideous mistake.

She wasn't wrong.

They quickly flew back the way they had come just as the hunters reached the site and were examining the row of objects. Unfortunately they didn't notice that some of them were openingâ€¦

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Early morning : the next day

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Malarnex and Vorka checked the landing site carefully. They had found the row of eggs and the destroyed machines. There was a crucial difference now, however, as the eggs were open at the tops. They looked everything over carefully and then burnt the remains of the eggs with a flame-thrower.

It is as I feared, Malarnex said. The prey has managed to breed. Someone must have sabotaged the shuttle.

Should we wait for reinforcements? Vorka asked.

If we do, the prey will control half the planet by the time they get here! We must at least delay them ourselves.

If we die, at least it will be in a good hunt! Vorka said with fire.

Malarnex smiled under his mask. _At least he's ready to hunt and he's not brooding anymore._ We'll head for the nearest settlement. The prey will most likely be there.

They cloaked and left the site. Malarnex would not have been so happy if he'd known Vorka's thoughts.

Fine, Leader, I'll hunt the prey. With luck I can settle a little score of my own whilst I'm here tooâ€¦

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At school

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The Animorphs, minus Ax and Tobias, were taking a break in the cafeteria.

"It's amazing they got this place working again at all with what happened a few months ago," Ryan said.

Marco nodded. "It doesn't help a school when papers show cops bringing dead kids out the front door with their guts hanging out."

"Will you shut up, Marco!" Cassie snapped, looking slightly green.

"Yeah, don't remind me!" Jake said. "I still have nightmares from that!"

They all nodded. The Predator incident was not one that anyone wanted to go through again. They were so wrapped up in their thoughts they didn't notice Johnny and two of his other friends enter the cafeteria at first.

Jake was the first to notice. "Oh great, look what just walked in."

"Thanks to them, we couldn't get near whatever that thing was yesterday," Marco grumbled.

"Tobias told me that he had a look with Ax this morning, Rachel said. They found a lot of burn marks but nothing else. Someone set a fire out there."

"Wonder who did that?" Marco sneered.

"Whatever that thing was it can't have been important then, could it?" Ryan said. "I mean if it was something would have happened by now, right?"

As Ryan finished talking, they noticed that Johnny didn't look very well. He seemed to break into a fit of coughing. His friends were looking at him in some concern and were asking if he was all right. Then, to the shock and horror of everyone in the cafeteria, his coughing turned to choking and he started clutching at his chest. His friends stepped back quickly as blood appeared on his chest, seemingly out of nowhere. Johnny was screaming as his chest blew apart and a hissing creature burst out. It was about forearm length, flesh coloured and had a large mouth full of sharp teeth. It jumped from its nesting place and slithered away before anyone could stop it. Johnny convulsed twice more and then collapsed to the floor unmoving. The Animorphs gaped in shock as everyone else started to scream and run from the cafeteria. They were all thinking the same

thought.

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What the hell was in that meteorite yesterday?

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The school basement

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The newborn creature had managed to slip out of the cafeteria and down to the basement without being seen again. It was now growing remarkably fast and was starting to change shape and colour. Its skin was changing from flesh colour to black and it was hardening, becoming more like reinforced carapace than skin. Its head was elongating, becoming banana-shaped and it was starting to grow a tail. Its thoughts and instincts were rather basic. After all, it had only two purposes: to breed and to kill

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Outside the school: half an hour later

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Everyone had been moved outside the school soon after the cafeteria incident whilst the police went over everything. The Animorphs had met up in a corner of the yard and were talking quietly.

"Any idea what we should do now?" Rachel was asking. "I wish Ax was here, he might know more about this."

"Or Erek," Cassie added.

"I bet that thing in the mountains yesterday wasn't a meteorite," Ryan said. "Only thing is, what was it?"

"Nothing good if Johnny is anything to go by." Marco didn't sound his usual self.

Chapman then emerged from the school and announced that the police were shutting the school down for the day for their investigation. Normally this would have been met with a cheer but spirits were, not surprisingly, somewhat low.

"Even Chapman looks shocked," Cassie said. "I don't think this is the Yeerks' work."

"I don't either, Cassie," Jake replied. "But if it isn't the Yeerks, who or what is doing this?"

"Should we take another look at the crash site?" Rachel asked. "Tobias and Ax only had a quick look there this morning from the air."

"Yeah, perhaps we should. Then we'll talk to Erek," Jake decided.

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Cassie's barn

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Burst out of his chest? Ax did not look or sound happy at this. I am sorry, Prince Jake, but it does not sound like any species I have ever heard of.

"That's ok, Ax," Jake replied. "But do you think it's another Yeerk weapon?"

No, I would think not. The Yeerks want the human race alive for use as hosts. This other species would probably not do that if it uses humans as egg incubators.

Maybe we should check that crash site again, Tobias suggested.

I'm in! Rachel and Ryan said at the same time. They looked at each other and grinned.

Marco shook his head. "I'd better go as well just to make sure you two nuts get back in one piece!"

Jake nodded. "Alright. While you're doing that we'll go and see Erek. Maybe he knows what's going on. Just don't do anything stupid, ok?"

"What, us?" Rachel said innocently.

"Oh boy. I can tell I'm in for a bad day," Marco groaned.

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Over the mountains

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There it is, Marco said, looking down at the crash site.

I'll stay up here and watch from the air, Tobias said.

Ok, let's do it! Rachel shouted with her usual enthusiasm.

Right! Ryan was right behind her.

I'm stuck with a pair of psychos! I'm doomed! Marco sighed.

Good luck then, Marco, Tobias chuckled as he watched them descend.

They landed at the site and demorphed. Or rather they landed at what was left of the crash site. The whole area appeared to have been burned.

"Whoa! What happened to this place?" Ryan asked in amazement.

"Someone's been over this with a flame-thrower or something," Rachel

said. "Maybe Jake was wrong about the Yeerks not being in on this?"

"Maybe," Ryan replied. "But why burn everything here? What could be worth doing this?"

"Uh. T-that m-maybe?" Marco said shakily.

Rachel and Ryan looked at Marco. He was shaking in terror.

"What's wrong?" Rachel asked.

Marco pointed behind them. They turned round and then wished they hadn't! There were three of them. They were standing twenty feet away. Gigantic, black, long arms and legs, sharp and spiny tails, long dark skulls and dripping razor sharp teeth.

Ryan was shaking now and even Rachel looked like she was losing it. Tobias had seen them from the air but there was nothing he could do.

"Oh s-shit!" Ryan just managed to blurt out before the creatures snarled and ran at them at full speed.

"AHHHHHHHHH!!!"

They had no time to morph. All they could do was shut their eyes and wait for the end.

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The Chee Base

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Meanwhile Jake, Cassie and Ax were at the Chee underground park with Ere. Ere looked as confused as Ax had been when he heard the story.

"Sorry guys, but I haven't heard of any species like that either. The Yeerks haven't been doing anything much recently. Chapman and the others seem just as confused as you do. Whatever it is, I don't think it's their work."

"Yeah, that's what we figured," Jake replied. "If it isn't the Yeerks though, who's doing this?"

"We'd better find out," Ere replied. "I think I might know how, too."

The park around them began to dissolve and was replaced by another hologram.

"What's this?" Cassie asked.

"One of my friends, Jenny, is at the school. We're seeing what she is seeing," Ere said.

Why there? Ax asked.

"Because that's where you first saw this thing. Oddly enough, the police that were sent there today haven't come out again either. According to my contacts in the Yeerks, they should have finished there an hour ago," EreK said.

The hologram was of the school's main corridor. It was empty. There was, however, a dripping sound coming from around the corner. Everyone watched through Jenny's eyes as she walked down the corridor

and turned the corner. No one was prepared for the hideous sight that awaited them. There were three dead police officers. All had been ripped open and most of their insides were spread across the floor and walls. Standing over the remains was one of the black aliens. It had just finished tearing up the cops and its mouth was dripping slime and blood.

Erek didn't waste time. "Jenny, get out of there NOW!"

The hologram faded away as EreK cut the connection.

"What the hell was that thing?" Jake asked in shock and horror.

"I don't know but my guess would be it's the thing that burst out of your friend's chest this morning," EreK said.

If it is, then it has grown remarkably fast since this morning! Ax said in disbelief.

Cassie looked like she was going to be sick. "Will she be alright?" she asked EreK in concern.

"Don't worry about Jenny, she's fast and resilient like all Chee are. She'll be back here soon. I'd be more worried about everyone else up there if I were you."

A nasty thought struck Jake. "What about the others? SHIT! I never should have sent them to check that crash site!"

"Crash site?" EreK asked.

They filled him in on the rest of the details. His face became grimmer than ever.

"If that creature isn't unique! I think we're in big trouble!" he finally said. "Go and help your friends. I hope it isn't too late!"

They needed no further prompting. They ran out of the park through all the dogs to the lift. Jake was beside himself with worry.

"I never should have sent them! What if they're!"

"Jake! Calm down. It wasn't your fault," Cassie tried to reassure him.

She is right, Prince Jake. Worrying about them will not help, will it? Ax put in.

"Easy for you to say, Ax," Jake retorted. "You didn't send them up

there, did you? I only hope we'll be in time toâ€¦!"

Jake stopped in mid-sentence as he realised they weren't in the lift anymore. They were surrounded by greenish-blue light. They were in the Ellimist's domain.

"Oh no, not NOW!" Jake screamed.

We have no time for your games, Ellimist! Ax roared in anger.

AND WHO SAYS I'M PLAYING ANY, ANDALITE?

That stunned them all. They had never heard the Ellimist sound so serious.

"Can't this wait? Our friends may be in trouble!" Cassie asked.

I'M AFRAID IT CAN'T. BUT YOU NEEDN'T WORRY ABOUT YOUR FRIENDS. AFTER ALL, THEY'RE NEEDED TOO.

As he finished his sentence, Marco, Ryan, Rachel and Tobias appeared nearby. Tobias was in the middle of a dive and the others were cowering in terror with their eyes shut. Tobias was the first to speak.

Uh guys, I think you can open your eyes now.

They all looked around.

"Are we dead?" Ryan asked, still shaking in fear.

NO RYAN, NOT YET.

"Who? What?" Ryan was looking around in shock.

"It's ok. It's the Ellimist. He's a friend. Sort of," Rachel said.

"You're ok!" Jake yelled in relief, running over to them.

"Yeah, just. If it weren't for the Ellimist we would have been sliced and diced by now!" Marco said.

You were in trouble? What kind of trouble? Ax asked.

"What kind? Oh, so tall, black, big skull, claws, long tail and more sharp teeth than Count Dracula's entire family," Marco quipped, although he was shaking in fear too.

"You saw one too?" Cassie asked in horror.

"One? There were three of them!" Rachel said.

"We're in big trouble," Jake sighed.

PRECISELY WHY I HAVE BROUGHT YOU HERE.

You know this species? Ax asked.

UNFORTUNATELY ALL TOO WELL. WHEREEVER THEY GO THEY BRING DESTRUCTION

WITH THEM. THEY ARE AN ABHORRENCE TO ALL OTHER LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE.

"How did they get here? In that thing that crashed yesterday?" Cassie put in.

YES. THEIR SEEDS WERE IN THAT SHUTTLE. IT WAS NOT MEANT TO LAND HERE HOWEVER. THAT WAS CRAYAK'S WORK.

"Crayak?" Jake asked, noting that the Ellimist had a lot of venom in his voice.

MY, NO, OUR OPPONENT IN THIS 'GAME' AS YOU PUT IT. HIS LAST ATTEMPT AT DESTROYING YOU FAILED SO HE IS TRYING A NEW APPROACH.

"Oh great. I thought it was something really dangerous," Marco sneered.

I CAN NOT INTERFERE DIRECTLY IN THIS AFFAIR. I HAVE ALREADY BENT THE RULES BY SAVING YOUR LIVES ONCE. HOWEVER I CAN GIVE YOU SOME OTHER HELP.

"And what would that be?" Rachel asked sceptically. She was grateful to the Ellimist for saving her life but, like Ax, she didn't trust him fully.

I CAN GIVE YOU ALLIES. CRAYAK HAS OFFENDED THEM BY HIS ACTIONS ALSO. YOU NOW HAVE A COMMON PURPOSE.

"Oh no!" Marco screamed as he saw who the Ellimist had brought. The others looked around. Two Predators stood behind them armed to the teeth: Malarnex and Vorka. They were looking around in confusion until they noticed the Animorphs.

You! Vorka roared.

Jake shut his eyes in despair. _What did we ever do to deserve this?_

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TO BE CONTINUEDâ€¦

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2. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Animorphs: The Black Death **

Animorphs: The Black Death

2: Deadly Alliance

The Ellimist's Domain

**

No one said anything for at least a minute. The Animorphs and the Predators just stared at each other in disbelief for about a minute

before anything was said.

"Someone tell me this is a nightmare!" Ryan said in horror.

If it is, it's one you will not awaken from! Vorka snarled.

The Animorphs gaped in shock. They had never heard thought-speech from a Predator before. Then again the one they had fought before had never seemed interested in conversation, only in killing them.

So you can use thought-speech too? I never knew that, Ax said.

Yes. But you will never tell anyone of it! With that, Vorka drew his wrist-blades.

The Animorphs braced themselves, preparing to morph if necessary. Ax raised his tail-blade.

ENOUGH!

The Ellimist materialised between them. He did not look happy. The Predators stopped short. They seemed to know what he was.

I DID NOT BRING YOU HERE TO FIGHT EACH OTHER! YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO FIGHT TOGETHER!

Everyone looked at him in amazement.

"Fight together? Is that what he actually said?" Marco asked in shock.

"With them? Have you gone INSANE?!" Rachel screamed.

The Predators didn't seem to like the idea either.

We ally with no one. Especially prey! Vorka retorted.

"Why don't I show you what this 'prey' can do?" Rachel sneered.

ENOUGH! DESPITE WHAT YOU THINK, YOU DO NEED EACH OTHER.

"What do we need them for? They'll kill us the first chance they get!" Marco said.

I don't see a need for them in this hunt. What need have we for humans? Malarnex asked, speaking for the first time. He sounded a lot less hostile than Vorka.

THE PREDATORS HAVE HONOUR, MARCO. THEY WILL NOT BETRAY YOU AT THE FIRST OPPORTUNITY. THEY KNOW THIS SPECIES' CAPABILITIES AND WEAKNESSES; THEREFORE YOU WILL NEED THEM.

The Ellimist turned to the Predators.

AND YOU NEED THEM TO INCREASE YOUR NUMBERS AND YOUR CHANCES. REINFORCEMENTS FROM YOUR HOME WORLD WILL NOT ARRIVE IN TIME, AM I RIGHT? BESIDES, WE BOTH KNOW THESE ARE NOT ORDINARY HUMANS.

What if we refuse this offer of yours? Ax asked.

YOU ARE BOTH FREE TO DECLINE. I WILL SEND YOU BACK TO EARTH ALONE. HOWEVER, I BELIEVE THAT IF YOU DO WORK ALONE, YOU WILL FAIL.

With that, The Ellimist stood back to allow them all breathing space and time to think it over.

The Animorphs quickly huddled together.

"What do you think?" Jake asked.

I do not trust this. An Ellimist proposing that we ally ourselves with two Predators? Ax said in disbelief. You know what I feel about Ellimists. I vote against this.

"I vote yes," Rachel said. "Think about it. It'd be better trying to work with them rather than fight them and this new race and the Yeerks all at once. If they're so keen on hunting, we might even convince them to join us permanently and give the Yeerks a real hard time!"

Marco grinned. "Why don't you go propose to one of them now? You'd be a real cute match!"

Rachel punched Marco lightly in the arm and rolled her eyes as everyone else smirked.

"I'm with Ax. I don't trust those Predators at all," Cassie said. "That one won't rest until he's tried to kill us." She was pointing at Vorka as she said this.

"I'm with that," Ryan put in. "I still have nightmares about the fight with the first one. I'd rather take my chances alone and not have to worry about a knife in my back."

"I don't usually agree with Xena but I'm for it," Marco said. "Those black things scare me far more than those guys do. I say we team up."

So do I, Tobias said. I'd rather work with the Predators and keep them where we can see them than have them hunt us again.

Everyone then looked at Jake. His was the deciding vote.

"Sorry Cassie, but I'm voting yes as well. I don't like the Predators but Marco's right, those black things could be far worse. We know what the Predators can do but we can't say the same for this new race. If the Predators can give us an edge over them then we should do it. The Ellimist has never lied to us before either. He may have played with us a little but he's never betrayed us. We'll team up, for now."

Ax, Cassie and Ryan looked far from happy with this but they said nothing.

"We've decided to go for it if they will," Jake finally said to the Ellimist.

GOOD.

The Ellimist turned to the Predators again. Vorka still did not look happy but it was Malarnex who spoke and surprised everyone.

Done.

Vorka was enraged. Leader, we do not needâ€¦|

You question me? There was no mistaking the threat in his voice.

No, Leader, Vorka sighed.

I'LL SEND YOU BACK. FROM NOW ON, YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN. I CAN NOT RISK INTERFERING DIRECTLY AGAIN.

"Fine, but what if we can't pull this off?" Marco asked.

FIND A WAY OR WE ALL LOSE. ME TO CRAYAK, THE PREDATORS THEIR HONOUR AND HUNTING GROUNDS AND YOU YOUR LIVES, YOUR PLANET AND EVERYTHING ELSE.

The Animorphs then found themselves in Cassie's barn.

"Someone please tell me that was all a dream," Cassie said.

Suddenly Malarnex and Vorka appeared in the barn also.

"Nope, no such luck," Marco snorted.

What's wrong? You don't want us as allies, Marco? Malarnex asked.

The Animorphs, especially Marco, stared at him in shock.

"How did youâ€¦|"

â€¦|Know who you are? My entire race does. They have done since you defeated one of us. You're considered very worthy prey now. I am Malarnex, leader of the Fenris Tribe. We've also met before. At least, you and I have briefly. Vorka has not had the pleasure.

"When did we meet before?" Jake asked with a puzzled expression.

I watched you defeat my warrior, 'Prince' Jake. You fought well. It's one of the reasons I agreed to this alliance in the first place.

Ax broke in. You were one of the Predators at the ship?

Correct. I watched Jake and your other friend Dutch defeat one of my best warriors. By rite and tradition I was forced to make him commit self-death. Dutch is not here with you?

"No," Jake said.

Unfortunate. He could have been a valuable ally also. Still, no matter. Malarnex then turned to Vorka. Is there a holo-emitter aboard the pod?

Yes Leader.

Bring it here then. Our new allies must learn what they have to hunt.

Allies? Vorka spat in contempt. These are no allies of mine, Leader! As they will learn when I rip out their throats!

He then activated his cloaking device and ran out.

"What's his problem?" Rachel asked.

Simple, Malarnex replied. Vorka has a blood oath against all of you.

**

Chapman's House

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Chapman was not having a good day either. He was reporting to Visser 3 on current events, or rather he was trying to as he had little solid information. Fortunately for him, the Visser seemed more intrigued than angry.

Burst out of a human's chest? Visser 3 was asking incredulously.

"Yes Visser. As absurd as it sounds, it is true. I saw it myself. This boy was not the only victim either. Others have been found in various sectors of town."

No idea as to the cause?

"None that has yet been seen, Visser. However I believe it is a dangerous new life form. We discovered the remains of three police officers in the school. They had been dismembered."

Even Visser 3 looked stunned at that development. Well, Iniss 226, I suggest you try and find this life form before it becomes even more of a problem. I have enough of my own up here. A Predator ship entered Earth orbit a few hours ago.

"The Predators? Do you think they have something to do with this, Visser?"

It would be the most likely explanation, Iniss 226. However, I am not about to ask them about it. You must find this life form and stop it before it destroys our invasion plans. Any more deaths will make it exceedingly hard to operate in your area without scrutiny. We can not afford any more delays. Use whatever troops you need, but end this problem!

"Yes Visser," Chapman groaned as Visser 3 cut the communication link.

He had no idea what he was going to do. How was he to stand against this new race and possibly the Predators as well? Feeling distinctly ill, Chapman left to meet with his lieutenants.

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Cassie's barn

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"A blood oath? What for?" Cassie asked in horror.

It has something to do with the first Predator that hunted us, doesn't it? Ax asked.

Malarnex nodded. His name was Varkan. He was Vorka's elder brother.

Ax felt a sudden feeling of sympathy for Vorka and, to a lesser extent, so did Jake. They knew what losing a brother meant. But, needless to say, they didn't fancy dying for it.

"So he might betray us after all? Hunt us again?" Rachel asked.

While this alliance holds, he will not hunt you. He knows that if he does his own life will be forfeit. I will see to that! Malarnex growled. However once we are finished, it will be out of my hands and Vorka will have free rein to hunt whatever he likes. You will, no doubt, be his first choice of prey. If I were you, I would be ready for him when he comes for you.

"Why are you telling us this? Aren't you going to help Vorka or whoever he is hunt us too? And why were you so keen on helping us?" Marco blurted out rapidly.

Unlike Vorka, I have no personal stake in this. I won't be helping him hunt you. I never liked Varkan anyway; he had too much pride. He would have been destroyed sooner or later. I must admit, however, I was surprised when you were able to defeat him. But that is beside the point. The main reason I formed this alliance was curiosity.

"Curiosity?" Ryan sounded confused.

Yes. Your race intrigues me. Our prey archives describe you as 'weak and puny beings with little resistance to physical stress. Their only strength is cunning'. Yet, despite that, many of our hunters have been killed here in recent years. I've wanted to see what humans are really capable of. Now I have the opportunity. You have a slight advantage over the rest of your race with Andalite technology but that should just make things more interesting?

Jake, to say the least, wasn't happy with all this. We've got to work with a Predator who wants us dead and another one who thinks we're a science project! Just great!

Just then Vorka came back carrying the holo-emitter. It was small, square and metal in appearance.

Malarnex looked pleased. Finally.

He took the emitter and set it down on the floor in the middle of the barn. He touched a control on its side and stood back as it activated. A hologram of a flesh-coloured hand-like creature

appeared.

"What is that?" Rachel asked in amazement.

The prey in its first stage of development. It hatches from the egg, finds a host, attaches itself to the host's face and implants an egg into its chest. Malarnex showed no emotion as he said this.

"That must be what happened to Johnny and those others yesterday," Marco said, looking slightly green.

Correct. Once the egg hatches, it then erupts from the host and matures into thisâ€|

Vorka touched another button on the emitter and the hologram changed to the hideous black alien that they had seen at the school and crash site.

This is the warrior class. It's fast, aggressive and resilient. It is the greatest prey that we have ever hunted yet. It can produce eggs itself but only very slowly. We should have enough time to destroy them all before that can happen.

Ax broke in. So this is what we'll have to face? How many were in that ship?

Malarnex looked slightly sheepish. Twenty.

"Twenty?" Cassie said in horror and disbelief.

We wanted a decent challenge. We were supposed to be hunting these on another planet far from here. We didn't expect this to happen, Vorka said.

"Do they have any weaknesses?" Jake asked.

No special weaknesses. Blades and guns will kill them just like other species. But, as far as I am aware, nothing else will. Unlike us, they don't even need to breathe. I once hunted some on a dead planet with no atmosphere! Malarnex smiled, relishing the memory.

> A nasty thought suddenly struck Vorka. Leader, I've just remembered something! You remember saying that you wanted a good challenge? I think I might haveâ€|<p>

Malarnex did not like the sound of this. You might have what?

I might have put a special egg on the shuttle.

WHAT! Malarnex roared.

"Uh, what does that mean?" Ryan asked.

It means that we will have to face one of these, Malarnex touched another button on the emitter.

Another alien was projected. A BIG alien. It was at least three times the size of the warrior. It also had four arms and the head was very different; a large upsweeping frill backed it.

This is a Queen. The largest and most formidable of all the prey. I

have only ever hunted one and it almost killed me.

So this is what the Ellimist meant, Ax said. I take it she is their principle egg-layer and controller?

Yes. Once a suitable area is found, the Queen will establish a hive cluster and begin producing eggs on a large scale. Their numbers will then increase exponentially until they control the whole planet.

Disbelief and shock were spread across the Animorphs' faces as they heard this.

"Is that really possible? Do they have that sort of power?" Jake finally managed to ask.

I've seen it happen on more advanced worlds than yours. They underestimated the prey and did not act against them until it was too late. Unless they are destroyed here, this world will fall as well.

"I'll go and phone Erek," Cassie said. "This sounds like something he should know about."

Jake nodded and she left for the house.

The prey will move slowly at first, Malarnex continued. They will establish the hive at a quiet and secluded location until they have greater numbers. Then they will make their presence known.

"We'll have to find and destroy the hive before that can happen," Jake said.

"I'm in for that," Rachel added enthusiastically. "We owe those things big time for nearly killing us!"

Oh, I almost forgot, Malarnex said. The prey has one other characteristic feature. One that makes close range combat difficult. Its blood consists of

Just then Cassie ran back into the barn.

"Jake! Erek's in trouble. Five of those black things are at his house now!"

"Is he all right?" Jake asked with worry.

"He's ok but he's stuck in the basement. So are all the other Chee and the dogs."

It'll only be a matter of time before they break into the lift and reach them! Tobias said. We've got to go now!

Wait! Malarnex shouted. You're not equipped to face them yet! You can't

His words fell on deaf ears. They were already morphing to birds and were starting to fly out.

Madness! They will all be killed! Malarnex fumed.

What's wrong, Leader? Vorka asked.

Have you forgotten what the prey bleeds? What we are wearing these for? Malarnex asked.

The Predators were wearing modified black armour. It had been moulded from alien skin and carapace.

We are protected. They are not! We must go after them or we will lose all our new allies in one battle!

Malarnex and Vorka activated their cloaks and ran out after the Animorphs.

Vorka was more fired up than usual. _Don't worry, Leader. I'll make sure the prey won't kill them. No one's going to kill them but meâ€¦|._

--

TO BE CONTINUED.

3. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Animorphs: The Black Death **

Animorphs: The Black Death

3: Acid Reign

Over Erek's house

**

Everything looks normal from up here, Tobias said.

Yeah, well it always does, Marco was in full paranoia mode. It's what's inside that usually worries me.

We'll land at the back and go from there, Jake decided.

They landed in the back yard and looked around. They quickly noticed that the back door of Erek's house had been literally ripped into little pieces.

"Something tells me I was right," Marco said with no trace of humour.

"What about our new 'friends'?" Cassie asked. "Aren't we going to wait for them?"

"There's no time for that!" Ryan snapped. "By the time they get here it'll be too late. We've got to go in now!"

Jake looked far from happy about this but he nodded.

I will go first, Prince Jake, Ax said. The rest of you had better morph!

Ax was interrupted by a sharp hiss from the back door. One of the aliens had sensed their approach and was now facing them. Jake and Cassie went pale and froze; this was the first time they had faced one in the flesh. Marco started to morph to gorilla. Rachel was close behind with her bear morph. Ryan was morphing to his Andalite form. However they were only halfway morphed when the alien ran at them.

Ax did not hesitate. He raised his tail-blade and struck. It was a perfect strike as Ax neatly severed the alien's head from its body. It collapsed to the ground oozing bright yellow body fluid. Some of it had splashed over Ax's tail as he cut through the alien's head.

Nice one, Ax! Marco said. They're not as tough as they look!

There's four more inside if Erek was right. Let's do it! Rachel was fired up as usual.

AAAAAAHHHHH!!!

Ax's scream of pain took them all by surprise. They whirled round to see Ax's tail was melting! The alien blood was eating through it like cheesecloth. They looked at the alien corpse and saw the blood was burning the ground too.

"Acid!" Cassie exclaimed. "Their blood's acid!"

"Morph Ax!" Jake shouted quickly.

Ax started to morph just as two more aliens appeared at the back door.

Through instinct Rachel swung her claw and gashed the first one across the chest. Acid blood gushed over Rachel's claw and Ryan's left side. Both screamed in agony as it started to burn into them. Marco punched the second one hard and floored it. However it just got up and charged again.

Jake and Cassie hadn't morphed yet. They couldn't decide what to morph to! The aliens' acid blood rendered most if not all of their morphs useless. Tobias could do little but hover overhead; he couldn't risk his wings being damaged by acid. Jake quickly decided on rhino morph. He decided too late. The back kitchen window exploded outward as another alien jumped through it and landed inches from Jake. Cassie could only watch in horror as the alien ripped off Jake's right arm as if it were pulling a wing from a fly. Then it swung its left claw and severely gashed Jake's chest. Jake crashed to the floor unconscious from sheer pain, loss of blood and shock. The alien then advanced on Cassie determined to tear her limb from limb. It never got the chance. A blue bolt flew over Cassie's head and blew the alien in half. Malarnex decloaked and ran over to Jake. Vorka was only seconds behind, leaping in and ripping the other two aliens apart with his spear. The others managed to demorph and erased their acid wounds. Vorka charged into the house looking for more.

"Jake! OH SHIT!" Ryan was the first to notice Jake's horrific

injuries.

They hurried over to Jake's side.

He is dying. If he is to survive these wounds must be sealed soon!
Malarnex said. But maybeâ€|

"What?" asked Cassie.

I do not know whether it is safe for humans. He might not
beâ€|

Cassie went eye to eye with Malarnex. "If you can do something, do it
NOW or I'll kill you!"

Everyone was stunned. Cassie had never acted like that
before.

Malarnex sighed. Let's hope he's compatible.

With that Malarnex pulled out a large metal box and pressed a button
on the top. It opened to reveal a large array of surgical tools and
other nasty looking instruments which the Animorphs didn't recognise.
Malarnex pulled out a small burner from the pack and set it down next
to Jake. He tipped what looked like several white crystals into the
burner and then added a vial of purple liquid. The flame superheated
the crystals until they became glowing blue. Malarnex then scooped up
several of the burning crystals with a spatula and pressed them into
Jake's wounds. The others grimaced in disgust. Malarnex then packed
up his tools and stood back.

"That's it?" Marco asked in amazement.

Now we wait, Malarnex said. I hope it works.

To the astonishment of everyone, it did. Jake's chest wound was
sealing up and, better still, his arm was regrowing! A third of it
had grown back in two minutes.

"How, wha?" Rachel couldn't find the words. Neither could anyone
else.

That's our secret, Malarnex said. How many more of the prey are still
in the house?

None! They all looked round to see Vorka. He had a severed alien head
on the point of his spear. Erek came out behind him at a distance.

"Are you ok, Erek?" Marco asked.

"Fine. They never reached the basement. But the house sure needs some
work now!" Erek then noticed Jake. "Is he all right?"

Malarnex gently picked up Jake. He will be. We should go back to our
base.

"Back to the barn then," Ryan sighed. He wasn't in the good mood he
usually was after a battle.

NOT your base. Ours, Malarnex said. We have equipment there that you will need. Use your aerial morphs and follow us.

With that, the Predators cloaked. Since Malarnex was carrying Jake the cloaking shield covered him also.

I can see them, Tobias said from overhead. Morph and get up here!

**

Over the mountains

**

The Animorphs were having trouble keeping up with the Predators. Although they were carrying Jake they were still amazingly fast and the Animorphs had to fly at full speed just to keep pace. They knew where they were headed when they saw a large crater in the ground up ahead.

Where have I seen that before? Marco said mockingly.

Don't remind us, Marco, Rachel said.

They landed at the edge of the crater, demorphed and went inside. As expected, they found a pod at the bottom. It was identical to the first one and Vorka was outside the door waiting for them.

About time! he snapped. This way.

"He's as friendly as ever, isn't he?" Tobias sighed.

They walked along the glowing corridors of the pod until they reached the main room. Jake was lying on a table in the centre. It looked like he was wearing a tight fitting suit of black armour, similar to the Predators' suits. Malarnex was there to greet them.

He's fully healed. Once he wakes up, we can start again. Hopefully we'll be more cautious this time!

Rachel didn't like his tone. "Why didn't you tell us they had acid for blood?"

I tried! Malarnex roared. But you weren't listening. If you'd allowed me time to finish this might not have occurred!

Rachel said nothing more. The rebuke was due and she knew it.

Is the new armour ready? Malarnex asked Vorka.

Almost. I'll need more time to modify a suit for the Andalite. The rest are ready however.

Good.

What are you talking about? Tobias asked.

We've developed armour that the prey's blood can not penetrate. Your leader already has his. Malarnex turned to Vorka and the rest of the

Animorphs. Vorka, get them their suits. I don't want a repeat of this battle!

Vorka led the Animorphs into another section of the pod. Tobias stayed with Jake. The armour wasn't much use for a hawk or his other small morphs.

You should try and find the prey again, Malarnex suggested. I'll stay here.

Tobias sighed. All right. I'll be back soon.

With that, Tobias flew out of the ship.

Malarnex looked at Jake. They had been lucky once; they wouldn't be again. He knew that the prey should have had time to begin building their hive by now. They would have to act soon or this planet was doomed.

**

In the woods near town

**

Malarnex didn't know how right he was. The remaining warrior aliens and the new, fully matured Queen had discovered the woods entrance to the Yeerk pool. Two human controllers, or rather what was left of them, lay just outside the entrance. The aliens had killed them as they had come out, leaving the entrance open for them. The first alien that entered fell foul of the Gleet bio-filter. The Andalite inventors of the device had claimed it was a solid defence against any enemy nine times out of ten. This time was the tenth. The particle beam blew the first alien apart but in doing so it caused acid blood to spray everywhere. It ate through the walls and floor and the circuits of the bio-filter causing shorts, sparks and eventually total systems failure. Spurred on by the Queen, the remaining warriors charged past the body and the wrecked bio-filter without hesitation. The Queen somehow managed to manoeuvre her large form down the corridor after them. The Yeerk pool lay open and exposed before them.

**

Visser 3's Blade ship

**

Visser 3 was trying to come up with a new plan of destroying the Andalite bandits when he was disturbed by a call from the bridge.

"Visser, there's a transmission from the ground pool. It sounds urgent!"

Visser 3 hurried to the bridge.

Put it on!

The display screen showed a hysterical human controller at the

pool.

"Visser! We are under attack! They're slaughtering us!"

Screams could be heard in the background.

Calm down! Who is attacking you?

"We don't know what they are, Visser! They're killing us!
AAAARRRRGGHHH!!!"

Visser 3 could do nothing but look on in shock as the controller was torn apart by four aliens. He had time for a good look at the abominations before the screen went dead.

Get me Iniss 226 and the commander of the Pool ship immediately! We have a severe problemâ€|

**

The Yeerk Pool

**

Although there were only fifteen aliens, including the Queen, it had been an easy victory. They had taken the pool with the loss of only three warriors. Caught by surprise, most of the controllers had been killed before they could do anything. Others were paralysed and knocked out by the stingers on the aliens' tails, making them easier to infest later. The pool was also ruined. A wild dracon beam shot had sent one alien crashing into the pool, contaminating it with acid blood and killing all the Yeerks that were in it. It was all over after ten minutes. The guards were dead and the rest were either still left in cages by the Yeerks or paralysed by alien stingers.

The aliens now had the perfect place for their hive and a ready supply of bodies for infestationâ€|

**

Over the town

**

Tobias was having no luck locating the aliens. He had searched over the woods, mountains and the town and had come up with nothing. He decided to pay Erek a visit before he went back, hoping he had something to go on. He got more than he bargained for.

Erek was helping with the repairs to the house when Tobias flew in.

Erek?

"Tobias?" Erek turned to see him fly in. "Good timing. I've just got some news. The Yeerks are going crazy with panic! Those things attacked the Yeerk pool and overran it!"

They did WHAT! I don't believe it, Tobias replied in

disbelief.

"Believe it!" Erek said. "Visser 3's coming here to try and retake the pool. You'd better tell the others quickly!"

Tobias didn't need telling twice. He flew at top speed toward the Predators' ship.

**

The Predator ship

**

"Man, I thought we wore enough spandex already!" Marco complained. He didn't like the new tight fitting black armour he was wearing.

Ax looked even more uncomfortable. Vorka had had to stretch several layers over his larger form. I can't fight effectively in this!

"What is this stuff anyway?" Ryan asked.

The flesh of the prey! Vorka sneered.

"Oh MAN! Do we have to wear this?" Cassie wailed, looking slightly ill.

It's either that or be burned to death by the prey's blood, Vorka said.

They went back to the control room muttering under their breath. Jake was awake now and wasn't looking too happy.

"You ok, Jake?" Marco asked.

"I nearly get us all killed and you're asking if I'm ok!? No, I'm not!" Jake snapped. He then shook his head. "Sorry."

"Forget it, Jake. We're all to blame. We all charged in there without thinking," Cassie sighed.

Just then Tobias flew in.

Hey guys I know where theâ€¦|What the hell are you wearing?

Then Jake noticed his black armour. "Yeah, what is this stuff?"

"Don't ask!" Marco snapped.

"You were saying, Tobias?" Rachel said, impatiently.

Tobias quickly told them Erek's news.

"This is not good," Jake said.

No, not good at all, Malarnex agreed.

"What's so bad about it?" Ryan asked. "They've totalled the Yeerk

pool and killed some controllers. So what?"

It means the prey now has a site for a good hive cluster and a large number of host bodies for breeding! Malarnex said with exasperation.

"And besides the Yeerks and us, no one knows they're there," Jake groaned.

Ryan suddenly looked less happy.

We must attack now! Vorka said. Strike before the prey can breed again.

How? Ax asked. Even with this protection most of our morphs are useless against this species.

"He's right. We can't bite or claw them like we usually do," Cassie said. Do you have any other morphs? Ones that are more intelligent and bipedal? Malarnex asked.

Rachel's eyes lit up. "Yes! I've got it!"
> She then morphed one of their usual enemies: a Hork-Bajir. <p>

"That's good but we don't have those morphs though," Ryan said.

"We can stop at the Ellimist's valley and acquire some there," Marco suggested.

Excellent! Malarnex said.

"What's the plan?" Cassie asked.

Simple. We must attack before the hive is fully functional. If we wait for too long their numbers will become too great. How many entrances does this pool have?

There's one in the school, two in the mall and one in the woods that we know about. There's probably more that we don't, Tobias said.

"We'll use the one in the woods then," Jake decided.

Tobias looked at the Predators. I'll take our friends there. You'd better go and get Hork-Bajir morphs and meet up with us.

"I'll go with you. I've already got mine," Rachel said.

"Ok, we'll meet up in an hour. Let's go!" Jake was back in leader mode again, to the relief of the others.

**

The Yeerk pool

**

The hive was now up and running. The Queen had built her vast egg sac over the old Yeerk pool and had laid several eggs already. The

warriors had already carried some successful 'snatch' raids. With no one aware of their presence they had been able to sting fifteen more unwitting victims and drag them to the pool. They had been cocooned in resinous ooze and left near the eggs along with the caged victims of the Yeerks. The Queen began to send out more instructions to her warriors. More hosts were needed. It was only a matter of time before there were enough warriors to expand the hive to the whole town and then beyondâ€|

** **

** **TO BE CONTINUEDâ€|

4. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> The Yeerk pool woods' entrance
**

Animorphs: The Black Death

4: Visser's fall

The Yeerk pool woods' entrance

**

Rachel, Tobias and the Predators had arrived to find the Yeerks already there. Visser 3 was in his Andalite form and at least twenty human controllers, including Chapman and Tom, were there too.

Oh great! They were the last thing we needed! Rachel snorted.

It might not be so bad, Rachel. They could do the job for us, Tobias said. If they win we get a crack at them when they're done with the aliens. If they don't, wellâ€|

Nice in theory, Tobias. But I can't see Jake being too happy about losing his brother.

And what are we supposed to do about that?

Let's just try and listen in, ok?

"The situation is not good, Visser," Chapman was saying. "We've sent two teams down already and neither have returned."

I don't care if you have to send a hundred teams down! We must retake the pool or our losses will be even more severe! Visser 3 snapped.

"We might not have to, Visser," another controller said. "We may have found a way around this problem."

What is it? the Visser asked impatiently.

"According to our sensors the creatures are behaving like insects. They've formed a hive over the pool area. They're also communicating with radio signals."

Radio signals? The Visser sounded incredulous.

"Yes Visser. Although there's no advanced equipment involved we are detecting two way signals between the creatures."

"Even if that's true how does it help us?" Chapman asked impatiently.

The other controller looked slightly smug. "If we could block the signal and transmit one of our ownâ€¦"

The Visser seemed to like the idea. How long before you could arrange this?

"One hour, perhaps two? We still need to isolate the wavelength they're using but I'm confident we'll overcome that shortly."

Excellent! We'll fall back until it's ready.

**

Over the mountains

**

Meanwhile Jake and the others had acquired their Hork-Bajir morphs and were flying to the pool entrance.

How the hell did they reattach my arm without me morphing? Jake was asking.

I am not entirely sure, Prince Jake. However they did not reattach your arm, theyâ€¦ Ax struggled to find the right words.

They grew another one, er, I think, Marco said.

They what? Jake said.

Everyone tried to explain what Malarnex had done.

Sorry I asked! Jake said.

It's a good job you weren't awake while he did it, Ryan said. "It looked pretty painful.

Let's forget it, ok? Jake sighed, sounding slightly squeamish.

They soon arrived at the entrance and met up with the others.

What's happening? Cassie asked as she landed.

Rachel and Tobias were still perched on a branch and the Predators were waiting on the ground, cloaked.

Visser 3 thinks he can control the aliens. They're working on something now. Tobias said.

Is that possible? Ax asked.

I'm not certain. I don't believe so, Malarnex broke in.

Why wait for them at all? Vorka snapped. Why don't we just destroy them and then hunt the prey ourselves? Besides, what rewards would the Elders give for a prize trophy like the head of Visser 3?

We'll wait for now, Malarnex said firmly. I'm interested in learning what the Yeerks are up to. We'll let them make the first move.

How much time do we have, Ax? Jake asked.

Forty five minutes remain, Prince Jake. If they do not act soon we will have to retreat and demorph.

Let's hope something happens soon. I'm worried about what the aliens are up to down there, Cassie said.

**

Rachel's house

**

Cassie was right to be worried. The aliens were now getting bolder and were making more 'snatch' raids in the town. They used the more secluded pool entrances to come and go, stinging unsuspecting victims and dragging them back to the hive. With most of the population unaware of their presence it was easy. Rachel's sister, Jordan, was no exception. Rachel's mom was busy on the phone with a client and trying to watch Sara at the same time. Unfortunately that meant she never heard Jordan's scream and the loud crack of a descending alien stinger from the back yardâ€¦

**

The Yeerk Pool

**

Having your freedom from the Yeerks wasn't worth much when all you had to look forward to was another alien blowing out of your chest. The victims could only watch in despair as the Queen started to lay another batch of eggs through her sac and sent out five warriors on another 'snatch' raid. She would need many more bodies before her hive could attack openly. More victims, including Jordan, had just been dragged in and were being cocooned in ooze near the egg sac. Another victim nearby suddenly started convulsing in agony as another new alien burst through his chest. It was the thirteenth birth since the hive had been established. The hysterical screams of the prisoners were drowned out by the roar of pleasure from the Queen. Her brood was thriving!

**

The woods' entrance

**

The Yeerks almost had their device ready. The main part was a bulky gun shaped machine that required two controllers to hold it. Chapman

still looked sceptical.

"Are you sure this contraption's going to work?"

"There are no guarantees but the theory is sound enough," the controller scientist replied. He was working on the small control unit for the device as he spoke.

Is that ready yet? I want to move soon! Visser 3 did not sound like he was in a patient mood.

"It's ready now, Visser. I just need to test it."

As he spoke, an alien warrior emerged from the entrance.

Well now's your chance! This had better work!

The controllers aimed the device at the warrior and quickly activated it, just as the warrior was preparing to charge at them. The scientist started punching commands into his control unit. The alien came to a dead stop.

Is it working? Visser 3 asked.

"I'm not sure. Give me a few more seconds."

The other controllers were taking no chances. They had their dracon beams levelled on the creature all the while.

Then the alien turned around and went back toward the entrance.

"Yes Visser! It works! I've got control!"

Excellent! You are certain of this?

In reply, the scientist punched a few more commands into the control unit. The alien turned right and moved forward again. Then it stopped.

"It's only basic control but it should be enough for us to retake the pool, Visser."

Excellent. Take the device and move in!

The Animorphs watched from their vantage point as the 'captured' alien went into the pool entrance followed by Visser 3, the scientist and his device and ten other controllers including Tom. Chapman stayed outside with the remaining controllers on guard.

They can control those things! Shit! Just great! Jake snapped.

So we have to fight them and the Yeerks together? I don't believe this! Cassie sighed.

Ha ha ha ha!

They looked round in surprise. The Predators were laughing their heads off!

What is so funny about this? Ax asked incredulously.

Malarnex answered quickly. We used devices similar to that one ourselves once. However they have since been retired from service.

Why? That one worked didn't it? Ryan asked, somewhat confused.

Vorka broke in. Yes. In limited circumstances it does work. But that was only one warrior. The more prey there is, the more strain will be placed on the device.

There is one other thing, Malarnex added. The main reason they were retired is that they are completely useless when a Queen is nearby. Her control of her children is too strong. No device can break through that.

But that means thatâ€¦ Rachel trailed off as she realised what it meant.

Malarnex chuckled again. Precisely. When the Visser gets down to the hiveâ€¦. He's in for a shock!

**

The Yeerk pool

**

Visser 3 and his party moved cautiously down the stairs of the cavern toward the hive. It didn't take them long to notice the Queen and her vast egg sac over the pool. There were ten warriors in front of her and they were starting to advance on them.

The device, quickly! Visser 3 shouted.

The controllers quickly aimed the device at the advancing aliens but this time they did not stop or falter. The 'captured' alien wasn't responding either. It had turned around and was advancing alongside the rest, hissing menacingly.

"Visser, it's not working! They're not responding!"

WHAT! There was fear in the Visser's voice. It was the first time anyone had seen Visser 3 actually afraid. Fall back!

"Visser!"

Visser 3 whirled round to see five more aliens on the steps above them. They had crawled over the roof and had come down behind the unsuspecting controllers. They were now cut off and surrounded. He quickly went over his options. None looked good. Even with his morphs he knew he was outmatched. Not that they were going to give him time to morph anyway. There was only one thing left.

"Visser! What will we do?" Tom screamed in panic.

Visser 3 sounded quite calm. We? We do nothing, I retreat!

With that, Visser 3 bailed out of the ear of his host and slithered

away into a dark corner.

The other controllers screamed in rage at the Visser's betrayal. These were quickly replaced by screams of fear as the aliens fell on them.

**

The woods entrance

**

Chapman did not take long to figure out that things were not going to plan. The fact that he had not received the all clear signal from the Visser's team was one good hint. Another was the five aliens that charged out of the entrance.

Chapman had no stomach for a fight. "We must retreat now!"

"What about the Visser?" another controller asked in panic.

"If he's still alive we'll come back for him later! For now fall back! Or do you want to face them?"

The others needed no further prompting. They ran like the wind. However they only got away because the Animorphs and the Predators attacked the aliens from behind. The Animorphs were in Hork-Bajir morph now and had some 'improvements': Predator wrist-blades and spears. Within two minutes the aliens were sliced and diced. Vorka roared in triumph as he sliced off the head of the last one.

Man, I could get used to this! Marco said, wiping the acid from his wrist-blades. These things are great!

I thought you'd appreciate them, Malarnex said. It had been his idea for the Animorphs to use the spare weapons; that was why he had suggested they use Hork-Bajir morph.

Come on, we've got to get in there now! Jake was really fired up. It didn't take much to work out why.

We'll get Tom out, Jake. We'll get everyone down there out, Cassie said.

We must go now then, Malarnex broke in. There is no cure for an infested host except a swift death!

**

The Yeerk Pool

**

Down below in the hive Tom was just regaining consciousness. He had been cocooned near the egg sac along with the others. Tom quickly realised the Yeerk in his head was gone. It had tried to bail out at the last second like Visser 3 had but it had been crushed underfoot as the aliens attacked. Tom just managed to turn his head to see his cousin Jordan cocooned alongside him. She was still out cold.

"Jordan? Oh man! Where the hell are we?"

In your hell I would imagine.

Tom then saw Visser 3 cocooned on his right.

"Visser 3?"

Not anymore. I am War-Prince Alloran-Semitur-Corrass, though for how much longer remains to be seen.

"Can't you shapeshift or do something to get us out of here?"

No. I think we were poisoned when we were stung. I can barely move a muscle. Most of my morphs are too large for this confined space anyway!

Tom sighed in despair. "Then we're dead meat!"

Don't give up. We are free of the Yeerk filth. We can only wait for rescue and hope.

—

Yeah right, fat chance of that! Tom looked around the hive and shuddered. However bad things had been as a Yeerk slave, he did not want to die like this. If ever he needed a miracle he needed one nowâ€|

TO BE CONTINUEDâ€|

5. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="Generator"> Animorphs: The Black Death **

Animorphs: The Black Death

5: Victory and Death

The Yeerk Pool

**

The Animorphs and Predators quietly entered the cavern without being seen. They immediately noticed the Queen and the egg sac.

Man! We have to take on that thing? Marco exclaimed.

She must die or your world will, Malarnex said coldly.

Tobias, you'd better check this place out, Jake suggested.

Right! Tobias had been perched on Malarnex's shoulder. He quickly flew high up to the roof of the cavern.

Can you see much up there? Cassie asked.

Yeah, a lot of corpses. They've hatched a few more warriors. There's

still some others alive near that egg sac. Visser 3's there and Tom's there too!

Is he ok? Jake asked in concern.

I can't tell for certain but he looks ok. OH MAN! Rachel

What is it, Tobias? Rachel asked. She didn't like the sound of this.

It's Jordan! She's down here too!

How'd she get down here? Marco asked in amazement.

The prey has been taking hosts from the town as well as using Yeerk ones, Malarnex explained. How many of the prey are there now?

Tobias quickly looked around, counting the warriors who were guarding the hosts and working on the eggs. About 25, including the big one.

I'm gonna rip their throats out! Rachel roared.

Take it easy Rachel! We'll get them out, right? Ryan looked at the others as he said this. They all nodded.

If they're not infested, we'll free them. Malarnex agreed. If they are, then we'll give them a quick death.

How can we tell if they are infested or not? Ax asked.

I will check the hosts. I will be able to tell if they're infested or not. The rest of you will have to fight the prey while I do this.

Finally! Vorka said in pleasure. He pulled what looked like a grenade launcher from his back. Let's hunt! Vorka fired at five warriors at the edge of the hive. All five were blown to bits instantly. The Queen roared in rage and signalled the rest to attack.

So much for the quiet approach, Jake muttered. Nobody was listening however. Ryan and Rachel had already hurled themselves into battle. Rachel was like a whirlwind as she sliced two aliens open with the spear she held. Ryan was just as fired up as he slashed at the aliens with his wrist-blades. Marco and Cassie were close behind them, ready to back them up. They were outnumbered but this time they were not outmatched. The aliens' numbers did not help as Vorka still had the grenade launcher. He blew apart another seven as they tried to charge as a group. This meant the aliens were forced to fight one on one with some very fired up Animorphs in Hork-Bajir morph. They never stood a chance.

Whoo-hoo! I love this! Rachel screamed as she slashed another alien across its throat.

Rachel! Look out! Cassie shouted as another alien rushed her from behind.

Rachel heard a sickening crunch from behind her and turned to see Vorka standing over the remains of a dismembered alien. One who had

nearly killed her.

Thanks! She managed to say.

Don't mention it. No one's going to kill you but me! Vorka sneered as he flung himself back into the fight.

Meanwhile Malarnex, Jake and Ax had managed to reach the trapped hosts and were starting to free them. Malarnex scanned each one with his vision before they cut them out. Occasionally they came across one who was infested. Where this was the case Malarnex knocked them out and then plunged his spear through their chests, killing them and the new-born alien inside them. Jake and Ax covered him, killing any alien who tried to interfere until they reached the area where Tom was held.

"Over here! Get us out!" he was screaming. He couldn't figure out where these Hork-Bajir had come from but right now he couldn't care less.

Is heâ€|? Jake was almost afraid to ask.

No. He is not infested and the Yeerk is gone. Malarnex said as he started to cut him out.

YES! Jake ran over and started to cut Tom free.

Ax had demorphed to his Andalite form to face what he thought was still Visser 3. Finally! Your life ends here, Abomination!

I can not stop you if you wish to kill me. But even if you do, the real Abomination will still remain free! Alloran managed to reply.

No more tricks, filth! This is for my brother! Ax was raising his tail-blade to strike but Malarnex blocked his way.

He's not lying. The Yeerk is gone.

Ax was incredulous. Are you certain?

My eyes never lie. He is uninfested also. I suggest we free him.

Can you morph? Ax asked as they cut Alloran free.

Not yet. I think I can walk though.

Tom and Alloran looked very shaky on their feet. The alien venom still hadn't worn off completely. Malarnex and Jake were just freeing Jordan when another alien tried to jump down on them. Malarnex swung his spear and cut the alien in two. The rain of acid blood missed Jordan by mere inches as Jake finished cutting her out. She was still out cold.

I will escort the War-Prince out, Ax said as soon as Jake had finished.

War-Prince? You mean he'sâ€|

Yes, Prince Jake, he is free as well. I will take them all back through the entrance.

Ok. We'll finish it here.

With that, Ax picked up Jordan and led Tom and Alloran to the exit. Malarnex and Jake remained behind.

Those were the last hosts. Now we just destroy the remaining prey! Malarnex hefted his spear again and ran back into the fray.

However there wasn't much of a fray to get back into. All that was left of the warriors were several piles of blood soaked bits. There were only the eggs and the Queen left and she was still attached to her egg sac. She was flailing about in rage at the deaths of her warriors.

Rachel was still furious. Shall we give her something to really cry about?

Good idea! Vorka sneered and fired two grenades. The first burst the egg sac and exploded inside it, ruining it completely. The second landed right in the middle of the remaining eggs, blowing them all to hell.

The Queen went berserk as her children were destroyed. She pulled hard until she ripped the ruined egg sac away and then she advanced on the Animorphs.

Uh-oh, I think she's pissed off! Ryan exclaimed.

Uh, shouldn't we run? Marco asked, shaking in fear.

Lead her outside, We'll destroy her there! Malarnex advised.

With that they ran out of the cavern and through the entrance tunnel with the Queen only seconds behind.

Any ideas? Jake asked as they came out of the woods entrance. The Queen was again struggling to move her vast form down the entrance tunnel.

I have! Follow me! Tobias took to the air again.

Where's he going? Cassie asked.

Don't ask me. Let's just follow him, Marco screamed as the Queen let out another enraged roar. She wasn't far behind.

Everyone ran through the woods after Tobias. Two minutes later the door was blown off its hinges as the Queen charged through after them.

Where are we going? Rachel asked. She then realised they were headed toward the ravine where they had helped free two Hork-Bajir a few months ago.

What's the plan, Tobias? Jake asked.

We can't outfight that thing, right? So we try and outthink it, see

if we can force it off the ravine.

Good plan, but I don't think she's going to stand still while we try and push her off, Marco said.

We need some sort of bait, Cassie suggested.

Oh good. Marco's perfect for that then! Rachel crowed.

WHAT! You've got to be kidding me! I've got to play chicken with that thing? Marco wailed.

Like I said, you're perfect for this. Playing chicken's what you do best and you're so annoying she's bound to run at you! Rachel sneered.

Thanks Xena, not! Marco snapped.

Better make up your minds quick, we're almost there, Tobias put in.

They soon reached the ravine. It was thirty metres deep and had a river at the bottom. It had been dry when they had freed the Hork-Bajir but now it had swelled into a fast flowing torrent.

What now? She can't be far behind! Cassie said in panic.

In reply Marco demorphed.

What are you doing? Ryan asked in amazement.

"Morph to birds and fly behind her, quickly! Trust me on this, ok?"

You have a plan? Malarnex asked.

"I think so. You have to get behind her as well. Whatever happens just blow her off the edge, got it? Now go!"

The Animorphs quickly demorphed and morphed to birds and flew up and behind the advancing Queen. The Predators quickly vaulted out of the way into the treetops. Marco stood alone in human form and waited for her. He didn't have to wait long. The Queen ran into view after thirty seconds.

"Hey, you wanted me? I'm right here!" Marco screamed, waving his hands around.

The Queen roared in rage and charged at him full speed. As soon as she did, however, Marco started to morph. By the time the Queen reached him he was in bird form and was flying beyond her reach.

NOW!

Vorka quickly jumped down from the trees, aimed his grenade launcher and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Vorka had used up all his grenades at the hive. Cursing, he tossed the launcher aside and ran at the Queen with his spear. The Queen sensed his approach, caught him in mid-lunge and hurled him straight over the edge of the ravine.

He bounced off the opposite side once before plunging into the river below.

VORKA!

Now it was Malarnex's turn to go berserk. He fired his shoulder gun and blew off the Queen's top left arm in a fountain of yellow acid. Jake and the others were back in Hork-Bajir morph. They surrounded the Queen and attacked her from all sides.

This is for Tom! With that, Jake cut into her right side with his spear. The Queen screeched in pain and started to turn toward him.

Cassie and Marco then cut off her tail from behind causing her to turn in that direction.

You're going down, you BITCH! Rachel then leapt up and slashed her across the throat with her spear.

In the space of a few seconds, the Animorphs and Malarnex had come up with an unbeatable plan of attack. They simply alternated blows on the Queen, bringing her closer to death with each cut. Confused and physically exhausted, the Queen had no chance. As she collapsed, Malarnex calmly aimed his shoulder gun at her neck and blew her head clean off her shoulders. Then he ran to the edge of the ravine but he could see nothing. Tobias flew down to the bottom but he couldn't find anything either.

I'm sorry. I can't find him, he finally said.

Malarnex nodded, turned and picked up the severed Queen's head and began walking back to the pod. The Animorphs followed behind silently. There wasn't much they could say.

**

The Yeerk Pool

**

Chapman and a small group of controllers had returned to the pool shortly after the battle. All had dracon beams, no one was taking any chances this time. They managed to find Visser 3 in the dark corner he had slithered into. Chapman quickly had one Yeerk leave his human host and Visser 3 took his place. Even as a human he still emanated an aura of evil and Chapman was still nervous around him.

"Are you all right, Visser?" he managed to ask.

"I was nearly killed by those aliens, our pool is ruined and I'm now stuck in this pathetic body. NO, I AM NOT ALL RIGHT!" he roared.

"The pool can be rebuilt, but it will take some time," another controller reported.

"Then you'd better get started, hadn't you?" Chapman snapped.

"Where is Alloran?" Visser 3 asked menacingly.

Chapman sighed. "I'm afraid your old body has eluded us, Visser. He escaped in the confusion. The Andalite bandits apparently teamed up with some Predators and freed him."

"Andalites and Predators working together?" Visser 3 couldn't believe it.

"At least they freed the pool for us, Visser. We will have it running again," Chapman promised.

"See that you do, Iniss 226, or we will all be suffering soon."

Another controller ran over to Chapman with a small communicator.

"A message from the shuttle, sir. Says it's urgent."

Chapman took the communicator. "Yes?"

"We've found a Predator washed up on the riverbank, sir. He's still alive. What should we do?"

Visser 3 grabbed the communicator from Chapman. "Take him up to the Pool Ship. I'll be up there soon to infest him myself." He then cut the connection.

"It seems you'll get some compensation after all, Visser," Chapman grinned.

"Yes. I won't be able to morph again but with the knowledge and power of this new host I'll be more than compensated!" Visser 3 smiled nastily and started to walk out of the cavern.

**

A Yeerk shuttle above the earth

**

The two human controller pilots were not in the best of moods.

"I told you the Visser would grab this Predator for himself," the pilot was muttering.

"Did you seriously expect anything else?" the co-pilot chuckled in reply. "I'd better go check on our guest and make sure he hasn't died on us. I don't fancy having to tell the Visser that, do you?"

"Fine. Just don't be long, we'll have to dock soon."

With that the co-pilot went down to the cargo hold to check on Vorka. The pilot then concentrated on manoeuvring the shuttle out of the atmosphere toward the Yeerk Pool Ship. Five minutes later the door to the cargo hold opened again.

"About time! You certainly took long enough
didn'tâ€¦|uuuurrrrrrrkkkkk!"

The pilot's sentence was cut off, literally, by the blade that was rammed through his neck from behind.

**

The Yeerk Pool woods entrance

**

Visser 3 and Chapman were waiting for another shuttle when they received another message through their communicator. It was from the Pool Ship.

"What is it now?" the Visser asked irritably.

"Something's wrong, Visser. The shuttle with the Predator is coming toward us at full speed. It's not responding to our hails and our sensors are detecting strange energy readings from it."

"Energy readings? What?" the visser's eyes widened as he realised what this meant. "OPEN FIRE! DESTROY THAT SHUTTLE NOW!"

**

The Yeerk Shuttle

**

A badly wounded Vorka now manned the shuttle controls. His wounds were almost mortal but he'd still had the strength to kill his captors and take control. Despite that, however, his wounds were too serious to do much more. He would not survive much longer without medical attention, which he couldn't get since Malarnex had the healing tools. Therefore he set the shuttle on maximum burn and set course for the Pool ship. Then he punched in a coded sequence on his wrist terminal, sending a quick message to Malarnex and activating his nuclear triggering system. He didn't want to die yet. His brother's death was still not avenged and now, he thought sadly, it probably never would be. He was starting to understand how his brother had been beaten, though. Those morphing humans were more worthy prey than they had first seemed.

—

It's a pity I never got a chance to hunt them, it would have been a good match!

—

Apart from that though, he had no regrets. If he was going to die then he would die as a Predator should, taking his enemies with him. His death would be glorious!

**

The Pool Ship

**

The guns on the Pool Ship fired at the shuttle again and again as the

commander tried to shoot it down and steer the Pool Ship out of harm's way. The shuttle was starting to break up under the constant dracon barrage when Vorka's self-destruct bomb went off. A massive explosion rocked the Pool Ship. The commander was able to regain his feet and his composure after two minutes.

"Damage report!"

There was no reply from the other controllers on the bridge. Their mouths hung open in shock. The commander thundered over to them in anger.

"Didn't you hear me? I saidâ€¦" He noticed the damage reports on the screen himself and gasped in horror and disbelief.

**

The Yeerk Pool entrance

**

***"What happened? Pool Ship, report!" Visser 3 screamed frantically.

The reply came a moment later. "Pool Ship here. The shuttle has been destroyed but we have sustained heavy damage."

"What kind of damage?" the Visser asked in growing horror.

"Our shields have failed, our weapons are off-line and we have severe structural damage. The primary landing bay is completely destroyed! The secondary is still operational but we won't be able to handle many shuttles for a while!"

"But that means thatâ€¦" Visser 3 trailed off in horror as he realised what it meant. With its landing capacity halved the Pool Ship wouldn't be able to take as many Yeerks aboard for Kandrona feeding and with the ground pool ruined alsoâ€¦.

There was a moment of stillness and, for a moment, Visser 3 seemed calm to Chapman and the other controllers. His scream of rage proved quite the opposite.

**

The Predator Pod: main control room

**

Ax, Alloran and Tom had arrived at the Predator pod ahead of the others after dropping Jordan off back at her house.

"With any luck she'll think it was just a bad dream," Tom had said as they left her in the garden still out cold. After that they had fled into the mountains at top speed. Alloran and Tom had to be kept out of sight from now on.

Aristh, I'll ensure that you and the rest of your force are promoted when we get home, providing I'm still in a position to bequeath gifts, Alloran said.

War-Prince, I have to tell you something firstâ€¦ Ax started to say just as the others arrived back at the pod still in Hork-Bajir morph (except Tobias, that is, who was still a hawk).

Ah, here they are! Demorph and identify yourselves. You've all earned promotion ten times over!

—

Oh no, he still thinks we're Andalites! Jake thought.

Uh Jake, what do we do? Cassie asked.

What he says. We demorph. I just hope they can handle it.

They demorphed to their human forms. Alloran's main and stalk eyes widened in disbelief.

Tom gaped in shock. "Midget!?" he finally managed to say as he saw Jake.

Humans? The Yeerk invasion has been held up by six humans and an Arith? If Alloran had had a mouth it would certainly have been hanging open.

I tried to warn you, War-Prince, Ax said sheepishly.

Incredibly, Alloran started to chuckle to himself. The mighty Yeerk Empire defeated by human children. Ha ha ha! If only everyone knew! They'd be the joke of the galaxy!

These children, as you call them, are no joke. They defeated one of my warriors sometime ago, Malarnex broke in.

The Predators too? Unbelievable. Alloran was having difficulty taking it all in.

Tom was having even more trouble. Not only was his brother one of the so-called Andalite bandits but so was his cousin and all of their friends were as well! "Jake, how did youâ€¦? How the?"

"Long story, Tom." With that they just pulled each other into a hug. Jake was trying hard to keep himself from crying.

—

Finally, no more nightmares about my tiger morph!

—

As Ax and the others began telling Alloran the whole story of the war, Malarnex began to walk away. Cassie noticed and went after him.

"Malarnex!" she caught up with him as he went out of the door. "I'm sorry about Vorka."

Don't be. He died an honourable death in battle. There is no greater end than that. Malarnex replied. You humans are a curious

race.

"How's that?" Cassie asked.

Vorka hated you. Had he lived he would now be hunting you and yet you feel sorrow at his death. I can not fathom why.

Cassie shrugged her shoulders. "I guess we just care about anyone who fights with us; friend or not."

Malarnex chuckled. Like I said, you are a curious race. Go back to the control room. I have a reward for you and I'll be back to give it to you shortly.

"What is it?" Cassie asked curiously.

You'll find out soon enough. I'll be back in a moment.

Cassie nodded and went back to the control room. Malarnex watched her go and then hurried to the weapons and equipment storage bay. He picked up a bowl and went over to a giant storage tank, both of which were made from alien carapace. The tank was full of alien acid blood. He filled the bowl and added a vial of orange liquid. He then sent a signal to his orbiting ship from his wrist terminal. They would land in a few more minutes.

Still he hesitated. He had debated what he was about to do over and over during the walk back to the pod. Most of the Elders would probably have gone ballistic if they had known what he was thinking of doing. Vorka would probably not have approved either. Never before had the traditions of his Tribe been stretched so far. Malarnex finally shoved all of these doubts aside. They had destroyed a Queen and a hive cluster. Whatever the Elders might say, they had earned this. He picked up another device. This one was box-like and had three tubes of blue liquid resting on top of it. There was also a pipe-like opening on the bottom. Malarnex went back into the corridor near the control room, opened its ventilator shaft and placed the device inside. He then pressed a series of buttons on the device and then stood back. The blue liquid was drained out of the tubes and thick bluish smoke started to flow out of the pipe. All he had to do now was wait.

Back in the control room, the others had just finished filling Alloran and Tom in when Cassie came back with Malarnex's message.

"A reward? Wonder what it is?" Marco wondered.

The Predators are an unpredictable race. I have no idea what it could be, Ax said.

"Did you lock this door, Cassie?" Rachel asked. The corridor door had closed behind Cassie when she had come through and now it wouldn't open again.

"No, I didn't," Cassie replied, puzzled.

No one had yet noticed the blue vapour coming in from the ventilator yet.

"This one won't open either," Marco said, trying to open the door to

the outside.

"Isn't there a switch or something?" Ryan started to cough and splutter as he asked this. Rachel and Tom also seemed to be having trouble breathing. Then Jake noticed the ventilator.

"What the hell!?" he then started to choke. "Gas! It's a trap!"

It was a fact they had realised too late.

Malarnex could hear all the reactions through the door. He waited until all the panic and pounding from inside had stopped and then he released the lock and entered. All of them were unconscious and would remain so for an hour. It was more time than he needed. He regretted having to use the gas but he doubted that he could do his work while they were conscious. Still carrying the bowl of acid, he advanced on Jake firstâ€|

**

In the mountains: one hour later

**

Jake was the first to come round. His head ached slightly and there was a stinging sensation in his upper right arm. He soon realised he was no longer in the pod. He and the others had been moved to the field outside the pod. The others were starting to come round as well.

"Ax, how long have we been out?" Jake asked.

One hour exactly, Prince Jake.

"What sort of a reward was that?" Marco snorted.

Rachel was just as indignant. "Yeah. Where is that double-crossing piece ofâ€|WHAT THE HELL HAS HE DONE?"

Rachel was staring down at her right arm. A thunderbolt, the symbol of the Fenris Tribe, was burned into her arm just below the shoulder. All the Animorphs checked their right arms to find they had been given the same treatment. Even Ax had one too. It was burned into his front below his arms. Only Alloran and Tom were untouched.

He'sâ€|marked us, Ax said in disbelief. He's given us his tribal mark! It looks like he burned it in with acid blood.

Alloran stared in disbelief. That's one of the greatest honours a Predator ever achieves. I've never heard of a non-Predator getting it!

"I'm flattered!" Ryan snarled. His tone suggested he was anything but. "My parents are going to so appreciate it when they see this!"

"I think I know one way of getting rid of it," Tobias said and demorphed to his hawk form. He then started to morph back to human.

That's good, Tobias, Ax broke in. But I think thatâ€

Tobias finished morphing and checked his arm only to find the mark was still there!

â€He would have thought of that already. Somehow he's put it into our DNA.

"So we're stuck with them. Just great!" Jake sighed.

There is one advantage, Alloran said. There's less chance of you being hunted now. Most Predators think twice before challenging a marked Warrior, so I've heard anyway. At least he didn't put them where they usually go. Alloran pointed at Jake's forehead as he said this.

"We'll just have to keep them covered up, I guess," Cassie said, resigned to the fact that they were stuck with them. "He's not coming back to remove them, is he?"

They all nodded. The pod was gone and so was Malarnex, back to his people and his hunting.

"Midget, what should we do now?" Tom asked. "I don't know if I can go home even! The Yeerks know me too well."

Jake quickly realised Tom was right. Tom couldn't go home or go back to his normal life. The Yeerks knew too much about him. It would only be a matter of time before he was reinfested or killed.

Prince Jake, he'll have to live in my scoop until the war is over, Ax said. He then looked at Alloran. So will you, War-Prince.

"What about our parents? They'll go crazy if Tom just goes missing!"

I THINK I MIGHT BE ABLE TO HELP WITH THAT. ASSUMING YOU WANT MY HELP, THAT IS.

The Ellimist materialised next to them in a human form.

An Ellimist?! Alloran said in confusion.

YES ALLORAN, AN ELLIMIST. ONE THAT'S ON YOUR SIDE I MIGHT ADD.

"Who is that?" Tom asked, his mouth hanging open again.

"We'll explain later," Rachel sighed.

"How can you help Tom?" Jake asked quickly.

I ALREADY HAVE. THE YEERKS ARE IN CONTROL OF THEIR WRECKED GROUND POOL AGAIN AND HAVE FOUND MANY BODIES. I'VE ARRANGED FOR TOM'S TO BE AMONG THEM.

"A fake body?" Marco asked warily.

OF COURSE.

"Will the Yeerks buy that?" Cassie asked.

THEY SHOULD. EVEN IF THEY DO NOT, THEY HAVE MORE PRESSING CONCERNS AT THE MOMENT.

The Ellimist then showed them Vorka's last moments.

"So that's what Malarnex meant," Cassie said.

Will the Yeerks survive? Ax asked.

UNFORTUNATELY I BELIEVE THEY WILL. THIS WILL CERTAINLY WEAKEN THEM, THEY WILL NOT BE OPERATIONAL AGAIN FOR WEEKS. BUT THEY WILL ENDURE.

"My parents will be even worse when they find out I'm 'dead'," Tom sighed. "Isn't there another way?"

"I can't think of one, Tom," Jake admitted.

"Better this than infested again, right?" Ryan said.

IT WILL CAUSE THEM PAIN. BUT YOU CAN RETURN ONCE THIS WAR ENDS.

"Will we ever win this war?" Jake asked.

LOOK AT WHAT YOU'VE ACHIEVED SO FAR. DO YOU REALLY NEED ME TO ANSWER THAT?

He vanished without waiting for an answer.

"Let's go home, shall we?" Cassie said, sounding tired.

"Jordan! Is sheâ€|?"

"She's safe. Don't worry," Tom told her.

Let's go to my scoop, Ax said. Tobias?

"Right!" Tobias started to morph again but not before Alloran looked at him more closely. His eyes widened again as he remembered who Tobias actually was.

Please don't tell them! Tobias quickly said to him in private thought-speak, recognising the expression Alloran was giving him.

As you wish, Son of Elfangor, Alloran replied with a smile in his eyes.

Is something wrong, War-Prince? Ax asked.

Nothing. Nothing of importance.

With that, they split up to go back home.

From his domain the Ellimist watched over them. He smiled.

YES JAKE, YOU WILL WIN. CRAYAK AND THE YEERKS WILL NEVER TRIUMPH SO LONG AS THERE ARE PEOPLE LIKE YOU WHO DEFEY THEM!

**

THE ENDâ€¦|FOR NOW

**

End
file.